

My name is Kathleen Flaherty. I'm a registered voter in Newington, and I am an adult adoptee.

I ask this committee to support an amendment to SB 977 to allow adult adoptees like me (born and adopted in Connecticut prior to October 1, 1983) to obtain our original birth certificates.

Let me share part of my story that many of you may not know.

I was born in Hartford and adopted through Catholic Charities. I have lived in Newington my entire life, except for college and graduate school.

My late brother and I always knew we were adopted - our parents told us. They didn't make a big deal of it - it was simply a fact. My brother died on March 31, 2003, at the age of 33 - from a heart attack. The medical examiner determined that it was due to a congenital heart defect - something our family never knew was in his history.

As many of you undoubtedly already know, I live with a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. After my first hospitalization in 1990, I requested non-identifying information from Catholic Charities. That's when I learned (among other things) that I have a family history of mental illness and addiction - my birth mother's mother was permanently institutionalized for an "unknown" mental illness and her father had died of cirrhosis (presumably a result of alcohol abuse.) This information was not shared with my parents when I was adopted.

Before my dad died in 2007, he told me that in his papers I would find my brother's original birth certificate, because Catholic Charities had given it to them, but that I wouldn't find my own. My brother was never interested in finding out about his past, but I have always thought about contacting Catholic Charities to put a note in his file to let his birth parents know - if they ever looked for information - that he had a good life, just one that ended far too soon. It wasn't perfect, and there were struggles, but it was good. Just far too short.

I have had my own torturous journey with Catholic Charities, which has contributed to my reluctance to put anything in his file. A few years ago, I contacted them to do an actual search for my birth parents. They found my birth mother, but she didn't want contact with me - which they informed me of in a letter that is literally dated ON MY BIRTHDAY. They could have waited a week, or even a day - but no, they sent me a letter dated ON MY BIRTHDAY to tell me that my birth mother didn't want to be contacted.

Through my involvement in Access Connecticut, a coalition with the goal of restoring the rights of adult adoptees to have access to their original birth certificates, I learned that there was a probate court procedure to seek access to one's original birth certificate. I figured, I'm a lawyer, how hard could it possibly be to file this case? Especially since probate court is set up to handle pro se litigants.

It was another futile exercise. I do not think the probate courts see many of these filings, because no one seemed to know quite how to handle the petition. It ultimately ended up in the children's division of probate court - I guess since I was a child when I was adopted (I was) - and for reasons I still do not understand, I had a guardian ad litem appointed to represent my interests. He didn't even know why the court did that - we had some very interesting conversations.

At the end of the day, this came down to the fact that my birth mother didn't respond to multiple certified letters for which she signed. Because SHE didn't grant affirmative consent to the release of MY original birth certificate, the court denied my request. At least I didn't get the ruling on my birthday this year.

I have since, like many others, did a DNA test through a commercial service. They've located some distant cousins. I reached out to one of them, but didn't hear back. From what I can tell from the public parts of his Facebook page, we do not seem to have anything in common, so I'm okay with that. Last Friday, I received an email titled "a relative sent you a message on 23andMe" - and it's a different relative. I've written back a short message, and we'll see what happens from here.

With the advancement of electronic medical records, I finally am no longer asked about family history when I go to the doctor. I do not know my family history (other than the mental health and addiction issues) when it comes to any medical conditions - every box (other than those) on the non-identifying form for both parents was checked "not known."

Every time someone says to me "I know someone who looks just like you!" I now say, "well, I'm adopted, so who knows - they could be a relative." It's getting old.

What people need to understand about this issue is that pre-1983 adult adoptees are being denied a civil right that most other people have, and don't even think about unless and until they need to get their birth certificate. Most folks simply contact city hall and the document they will receive will be a true and accurate reflection of the facts of their birth. Adoptees receive a document, but the document is actually an amended birth certificate which lists our adoptive parents as our birth parents.

Let's call this what it is - it is a government document that is literally fake news. The real news is locked away in a vault. And this fake news actually has real consequences, as I've recently learned. Because of the new Real ID laws, in order to replace a lost passport one has to have a certified copy of a birth certificate issued within one year of one's birth. My adoption wasn't finalized until I was 13 months old - so if I am ever unlucky enough to lose my passport, I may not be able to get a new one, because I will not be able to acceptably prove to the US government that I was born here because the document that the state of Connecticut provides about my birth isn't the original one.

I urge this committee to do the right thing and support an amendment to Senate Bill 977 to allow adult adoptees born and adopted in Connecticut before October 1, 1983 to obtain a copy of their original birth certificate.

Thank you for your consideration.

Kathy